

Healing Connections: Relational approaches to support familial trafficking survivors

Overview

Familial trafficking (FT) is human trafficking that is perpetrated by a family member or caregiver, such as a parent, grandparent, or partner of caregiver. Familial trafficking can lead to severe trauma because the lines between care, control, and exploitation are often blurred. Humans have an innate need to form strong emotional bonds with others for survival and wellbeing. When those bonds are harmful, they negative impact a person's growth and development.

This brief is designed to equip practitioners with information about attachment to better understand how relational interventions may effectively treat familial trafficking survivors.

Study background

To address the gaps in research, evidence, and training and technical assistance-related support on the topic of familial trafficking, [RTI International](#) funded this exploratory research study to improve training and technical assistance provision to anti-human trafficking responders. The research team completed a scoping review of familial trafficking literature. Then they conducted interviews with survivors of familial trafficking and practitioners who serve this population in Louisiana.

Translating research to practice

This resource explores the foundational principles of attachment theory for several reasons. First, these are offered to support practitioners' understanding of emergent practices to serve this populations. Second, survivors interviewed for this study said they want more people to understand what is happening to them to better provide trauma-informed care. Finally, the research team heard from practitioners & survivors that relational interventions work. In the absence of scientific research into the specific application of these approaches with FT survivors, this theory offers evidence for why relational interventions may work from a scientific standpoint.

SUGGESTED CITATION

McCallum Desselle, L., Bacy, S., Scalise, P., Barrick, K. (2025). Healing Connections: Relational approaches to support familial trafficking survivors. RTI International.

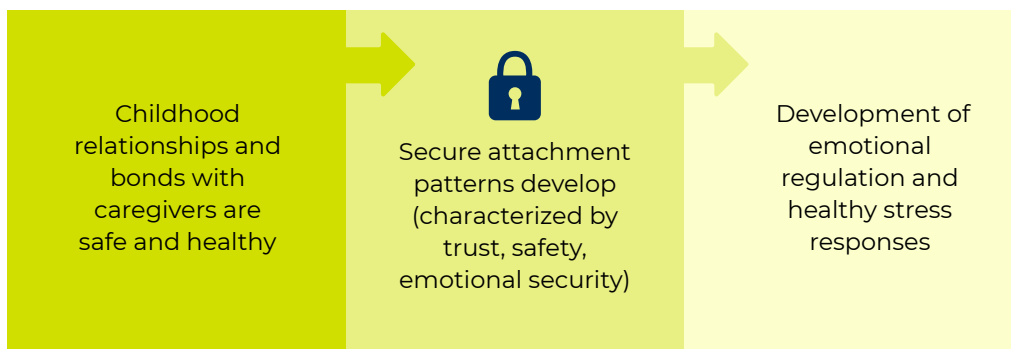
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Attachment patterns

Attachment patterns and trauma responses are frequently exploited across different trafficking typologies, including pimp-controlled, gang-facilitated, and other third-party trafficking scenarios. Yet, this heightened complexity of relational trauma deserves deeper exploration in cases of familial trafficking where the lines between care, control, and exploitation are often blurred. Understanding the power of attachment and relationships is essential for practitioners working with individuals who have experienced relational trauma.

Attachment Theory, developed by **John Bowlby**, highlights how early relationships with primary caregivers shape emotional development, self-concept, and the capacity to form healthy relationships. Early relationships with caregivers develop patterns that guide future relationships.

Secure attachment, developed in safe and healthy relationships, supports the development of emotional regulation and healthy stress responses.



Insecure attachment refers to relationship patterns that develop when early bonds, often with a caregiver, are marked by abuse, neglect, or inconsistency.



Early experiences shape attachment styles that can lead to difficulties with self-regulation and relational functioning later in life. Many survivors of trauma, especially relational or developmental trauma, have disrupted or insecure attachment patterns.

Relational trauma

When early attachment needs are not met, the result can be more than insecure attachment. This can lead to **relational trauma**, emotional and psychological harm that occurs in the context of close relationships. In instances of familial trafficking, attachment wounds are exploited, and additional impacts of relational trauma may emerge. For example, trauma bonding can further complicate familial relationships and intensify the psychological effects of trafficking. **Trauma bonding** refers to strong emotional attachments that develop between a victim and a perpetrator through ongoing cycles of abuse, often reinforced by moments of affection, apologies, or rewards. When combined with existing attachment styles or wounds, these bonds can become even more emotionally complex, especially in human trafficking situations.

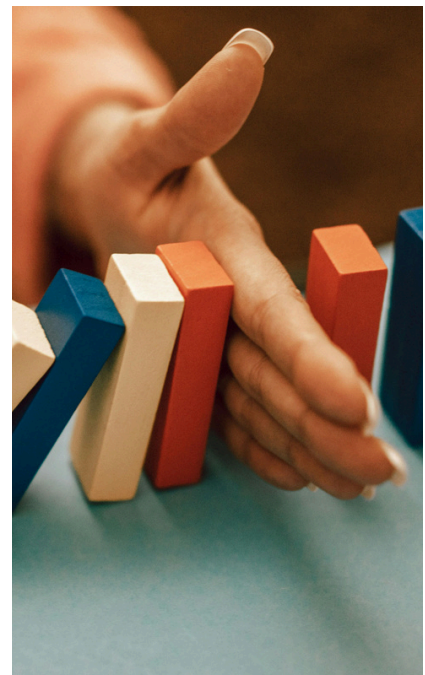
Relational trauma can have long-term negative effects on a familial trafficking survivor's health and wellbeing. However, **the impacts of relational trauma and attachment styles can shift over time** through supportive relationships, therapeutic work, and relational interventions.

Relational interventions

Recognizing the role of relationships in healing is essential to supporting the development of healthy and secure attachment patterns after experiences of attachment wounds and abuse.

Relational interventions, therapeutic approaches that focus on the importance of relationships and their influence on a person's wellbeing, can be effective methods to support survivor healing. By addressing survivors' relational wounds, these interventions can help repair and mitigate the effects of relational trauma.

Though traditionally applied in mental health and therapeutic settings, treatment models that center the relationship between helping professionals and survivors of familial trafficking are an emerging practice in trauma recovery within child welfare and direct service contexts.



Examples from the field

Examples of promising interventions identified during this study include the following:

- **Relational interventions** such as TBRI (see *the highlight to learn more!*)
- **Relational victim advocacy models** such as peer mentorship or adult mentorship programs
- **Therapeutic modalities** that address attachment wounds such as Internal Family Systems Therapy (IFS)
- **Attachment-focused approaches**, including Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR)

HIGHLIGHT

Trust-Based Relational Intervention® (TBRI®) is a trauma-informed, attachment-centered therapeutic model developed to support children who have experienced early adversity, abuse, neglect, or attachment disruptions. TBRI aims to create felt safety, build skills, and promote healing through nurturing relationships. It is based on the understanding that healing relational trauma requires safe, connected caregiving. TBRI has been used by caregivers, foster parents, and by professionals in child welfare and direct service settings.

During this research project, the research team learned of promising practices from the field in Louisiana that could be applied in other familial trafficking survivor service settings.

The **Louisiana Human Trafficking Collaborative** implements a relational victim advocacy model to support youth who have experienced sex trafficking. Victim advocacy programs like **Common Thread** and **Unbound Now** provide relational advocacy services that are driven by principles of attachment theory. For example, these programs use TBRI as a foundational approach to engaging with youth trafficking survivors. Every child who is identified as a victim of sex trafficking is eligible to connect with an advocate. This advocate provides long-term connection, care, and support through a child's life. These advocates are available 24/7 to respond to cases and support the child.

Many **child advocacy centers (CACs) in Louisiana** provide therapeutic services to youth who have experienced crimes, including FT. These centers are accredited through the National Children's Alliance to ensure consistent, evidence-based services. They offer a variety of age-appropriate and effective mental health treatments that can address attachment-related trauma.